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Reason, Relativism, and God, by **Joseph Runzo**. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986. Pp. xvii and 290. Cloth, \$29.95.

THOMAS F. TRACY, Bates College.

Joseph Runzo has written a provocative book on an important topic. The central question addressed by this ambitious study is whether "an absolute religious faith stance is compatible with the notion that truth is relative" (p. xiii). Runzo sets out to show, first, that the religious believer can and should accept a certain kind of relativism about both what is true and what is real, and second, that this need not lead to a general skepticism about the noetic value of our network of beliefs. The "absoluteness" that Runzo seeks to preserve for faith is, as one would expect, an absoluteness of commitment and not of content. The central tenets of the Christian faith have their truth within a conceptual schema which is one among many equally adequate constructions of a world. By virtue, however, of the crucial role played by these beliefs within that schema, the Christian will treat them as though they were absolute truths.

I will focus, given the limits of space, on Runzo's treatment of relativism and skepticism, rather than on his comments about the absoluteness of faith. His discussion opens with a brief account of cultural-historical relativity in various disciplines of inquiry, with particular emphasis on the theological significance of religious pluralism. The "diversity principle of religious relativism" claims that because religions are social constructions that reflect the cultural traditions within which they arise, they are often incompatible with one another. This alone, however, does not constitute a philosophically interesting relativism. A second, stronger claim is made by the "dependency principle of religious relativism," viz., that the truth of any religious belief depends at least in part on the "patterns of thought" of the religious community which holds that belief (pp. 12-13).

This religious relativism is an instance of a more general relativism which maintains "that truth is relative to conceptual schemas (or 'systems of ideas'), that what is real and unreal is relative to conceptual schemas, and that there are many, equally expedient schemas for understanding 'the world'" (p. 31). The first of these clauses immediately needs qualification in order to meet one of the standard objections to relativism: viz., that it is either self-stultifying (by virtue of its self-application) or self-contradictory (by denying of itself what it asserts of all statements that bear a truth value). Runzo's solution to this problem is to restrict the scope of the statements to which the relativistic principle applies. "First order" statements in an object language (i.e., statements about objects, events, states of affairs) will be true or false only within a particular conceptual schema. But at least some "second order" statements *about* the object language will be true, if they are true at all, of every conceptual schema. Conceptual

relativism, then, asserts that first order statements bear a truth value relative to a conceptual schema. This principle, however, is itself a second order statement that is asserted to hold for every conceptual schema, and so it is an "absolute truth" (p. 46).

Anticipating a move to relativize second-order statements, Runzo introduces the notion of third order statements, i.e., statements about second-order statements. He insists that these cannot have a truth value "for truth and falsity are determined by the internal conceptual structure of schemas, and third-order statements are expressed in terms of their applicability across schemas" (p. 47). If the principle here is that no statement which is asserted to apply across schemas can have a truth value, then Runzo's position is in serious trouble. For in this case, absolute truths (like the principle of conceptual relativism itself) cannot be true or false—an odd result. This confusion results from mixing together two different questions in the discussion of third-order statements. Runzo asks whether we can assess the truth value of conceptual schemas as a whole. In response, he plausibly argues that conceptual schemas themselves cannot be either true or false. This should be distinguished, however, from the question of whether a statement can be true in (or of) all schemas. This is a possibility that Runzo must affirm if he is to avoid the standard objection to relativism.

It is of central importance to note that both truth and "reality" are relative to conceptual schemas. To say that a statement is true, is to say that it "states a fact about reality" (p. 36). Given this definition of truth, Runzo can argue for the relativity of truth by arguing the relativity of the real—these two relativisms entail one another. There is, on this view, no one "way the world is"; the range of possible constituents of one's world is determined by one's conceptual schema, and there can be more than one adequate (pragmatically expedient) schema. This "Pluralist Ontology Principle," as Runzo dubs it, does not reduce to saying that the world can be represented in whatever way we choose. A conceptual schema determines the ways things could be (i.e., a set of possible "world orders"). But the way things are, for those who share that schema, is determined by their conceptually structured interaction with mind-independent reality. Runzo, then, distinguishes a reality that is relative to conceptual schemas, *viz.*, the phenomenal world, from a reality that is independent of all conceptual schemas and is variously represented by them, *viz.*, noumenal reality (e.g., p. 60).

Conceptual schemas can differ in two ways. First, they can include different categories of things among the possible constituents of their worlds. Second, they can affirm incompatible properties of the same entities, so that a proposition that is true in one conceptual schema may be false in another (p. 54). It is this result, of course, that stimulates the charge that conceptual relativism leads to subjectivism and skepticism. Runzo responds to the charge of subjectivism by insisting that conceptual schemas are shared, social structures which cannot be

adopted or abandoned simply as a matter of private choice. The worry about skepticism is more complex. Runzo seems to be principally concerned with the suggestion that if a single religious claim can have different truth values in different conceptual schemas, then we cannot be confident about its truth value at all (pp. 16, 182). "Since religious beliefs, if true, will be conceptual-schema-relative true, no particular set of religious beliefs will have any more claim to an individual's adherence than any other, opposing set of beliefs" (p. 214).

Runzo offers a list of six reasons why his conceptual relativism need not lead to skepticism (pp. 214ff), but he never gives what would appear to be the first and most effective reply, namely, that the skeptical maneuver begs the question. The skeptical *reductio* assumes that we can know the truth value of a proposition only if that truth value is universal, i.e., if it is the same for all knowers, whatever their epistemic circumstances. But that is precisely what Runzo's relativism denies; two different conceptual schemas can generate contrary truth values for a single proposition that occurs in each. It does not follow from this that persons who operate in terms of one of these schemas have no more reason to affirm than to deny the proposition in question. Within each schema, there is (*ex hypothesi*) epistemic justification for a particular judgment and this judgement conforms to the facts (i.e., in the world-order articulated by one conceptual schema the proposition is true and in the other it is false). The nagging sense that this leaves us without really knowing the truth value of the proposition gains its intuitive appeal from the law of the excluded middle. The proposition, we want to say, must be either true or false; if we find ourselves getting both results, then we just do not know its truth value. But this takes a logical rule that applies *within* every conceptual schema and applies it *across schemas*, claiming that a proposition must have the same truth value in every schema in which it appears. And this is more than a logical point; it is to reject ontological pluralism and insist that truth must be one.

The relativist has a ready response, then, to the charge of skepticism about the truth values of first order propositions. But this response lays bare two more troublesome questions: 1) what reason there is to think that there are or could be multiple conceptual schemas, and 2) what possibility is there of rational adjudication of disputes between competing conceptual schemas? Runzo has relatively little to say about the first of these questions. He tells us that the crucial principle of ontological pluralism cannot be firmly established, only advanced as plausible (p. 37). He also comments briefly on Davidson's challenge to the idea of a conceptual scheme, and he notes the problem of individuating conceptual schemas. The latter dogs his discussion; his examples of alternative conceptual schemas include competing theories within the natural sciences, opposed naturalistic and theistic belief systems, divergent systematic theological positions, and different world religions. In all this he provides little guidance in determining

when a disagreement involves competing claims within a conceptual schema and when it involves a difference between conceptual schemas themselves. These difficulties are not unique to Runzo's discussion; they reflect an elusive abstractness endemic to talk about alternative conceptual schemas.

Most of Runzo's attention is given to the second question, and he presumes that in answering it he is addressing the problem of skepticism. But that is a mistake if, as I have suggested, the challenge of skepticism is best answered (on his own terms) by discussing the justification of knowledge claims *within* conceptual schemas. When the problem is addressed as a matter of explaining rational choice *between* conceptual schemas, then there is a powerful tendency to talk as though we could assess conceptual schemas by a single set of universal criteria and to suppose that those schemas which better satisfy these criteria correspond more exactly to reality. Any such notion of correspondence, however, is incompatible with the ontological pluralism essential to conceptual relativism.

Runzo is aware of these hazards, but he falls prey to them nonetheless. He points out that there can be no question of choosing between entire conceptual schemas, but only of criticizing and revising parts of one's web of beliefs (p. 218). Yet he speaks of "interschematic rational checking procedures" and of "trans-schema pragmatic criteria" that must be employed if our commitment to a conceptual schema is to be "objective" (pp. 214ff). Runzo has already argued that certain basic logical rules, like the principle of noncontradiction, should be regarded as "absolute truths" which place limits upon what can be said in any conceptual schema. It is much more problematic, however, to suggest that there are universal *pragmatic* criteria for assessing conceptual schemas. Runzo's own relativistic principles would seem to suggest that pragmatic criteria will be creatures of particular conceptual schemas—different schemas presumably are rooted in patterns of life governed by different practical concerns. If, however, these criteria are genuinely trans-schematic, then he will be able to sustain his relativism only if more than one conceptual schema can adequately satisfy them. But then he will not be able to appeal to these criteria in justifying our commitment to one of these conceptual schemas rather than another.

Runzo, in fact, goes in both directions here. On the one hand, he clearly maintains that there is an irreducible plurality of "basically adequate" conceptual schemas. On the other hand, he asks whether what we say about phenomenal reality is true of noumenal reality, and he proposes that "our schemas will provide better guidance—that is, be more pragmatically expedient—as they more accurately correspond to noumenal reality" (p. 246). But this question should never arise, on Runzo's account. For the truth about noumenal reality can only be what is true within one or another conceptual schema. To talk this way of pragmatic criteria that offer tests for correspondence to noumenal reality is to suppose that there is a truth about noumenal reality (a way things really are)

independent of any conceptual schema. And that is to abandon conceptual relativism.

After all his careful effort in defining conceptual relativism, Runzo is led into these difficulties by his concern first, to offer a defense of the "objectivity" of a theistic conceptual schema and, second, to provide some assurance to the theist that talk about God correctly refers to a reality ("God in Himself") that "lies behind" the theistic schema (p. 252). The latter concern leads him to wonder about the adequacy of the "phenomenal God" of our conceptual schemas to the noumenal God, and this question brings with it the collapse of his relativism. The need to raise this kind of question points to something important in theism, viz., its insistence that what is real and what is true are not in fact variables that can take different values, but rather are fixed in their values by God. It seems to follow from the basic claim that God is creator that there is in fact a "way things are": viz., the way they are for God. Theism, then, both radically relativizes all human conceptual schemas (by insisting upon their partiality) and resists a thorough-going relativism (by insisting that truth is one for God). It may be that theism is (or is part of) a conceptual schema and that there are alternative conceptual schemas in which the concept of God does not occur or in which important propositions about God have different truth values. But in a conceptual schema that makes it possible to speak of God as creator, it would appear that there will be intra-schematic reasons to deny relativism. If this is correct, then the problem about God and relativism is not principally that of whether one can sustain an "absolute faith" in the face of the plurality of truth.

There is much in this book on which I have not commented. Runzo's discussion of the conceptual formation of religious experience and his account of the nature of faith deserve careful attention in their own right. The argument of this book is rich in detail and bold in conception, and helps to draw a crucial set of issues into sharper focus.

Predestination and Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom, by David Basinger and Randall Basinger, eds. Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1986. 180 pp. \$6.95.

Reviewed by DEWEY J. HOITENGA, JR., Grand Valley State University.

The problem of divine sovereignty and human free will has to be one of the most intractable problems of Christian theology. Although this thesis is not their thesis, David and Randall Basinger have given us a book which confirms it nevertheless. The four views they present reduce to two: John Feinberg and Norman Geisler defend the view which the editors call "specific sovereignty,"